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Local water managers encouraged by governor's plan

By HEATHER HACKING - Staff Writer

Local water managers and Butte County Farm Bureau leaders offered mixed reviews to Gov. Gray Davis' plans for water management in the state, unveiled Friday.

The plan will no doubt be scrutinized and likely amended by the state Legislature, but at least there is something concrete to work with as far as planning, local water leaders said.

They agreed it looks good that the governor proposes more water storage, such as raising Shasta Dam and building a reservoir near Maxwell. But questions remain as to who will pay for certain items in the plan and whether Northern California will have enough water for agriculture.

David Guy runs the Northern California Water Association, which serves water users in the Sacramento Valley, for a total of 800,000 acres of irrigated land.

He said he is encouraged to see plans to develop the Sites Reservoir near Maxwell, which has ³been on the drawing board for some time. This will give that project some impetus.²

³I think (the governor's water plan) is very, very balanced,² and isn't weighted toward water users in Southern California.

It also includes the governor's endorsement for Assembly Bill 303, which would provide funding for local monitoring of groundwater.

But there are some things that raise concerns for agricultural water user. One is language that talks about a new user fee placed on water.

But the plan isn't clear who would pay the fee, growers or residential users, Guy said.

Les Heringer, Butte County Farm Bureau water committee member and manager of the M&T Ranch, agreed.

³Growers are under a lot of economic stress right now throughout California,² Heringer said. ³To pay more for anything is going to create hardship.²

Matt Colwell, general manager of Western Canal Water District, said voters just approved \$5 billion in bonds for parks and water, ³not to mention the federal government kicking in billions² for similar projects, so why add a user fee?

Colwell said he's also concerned about the plan's call for basin-wide planning of water. The Butte Water Basin includes Butte and Glenn counties, as well as parts of Tehama and Sutter counties.

³I get a red flag when I hear that,² Colwell said, because local governments could lose their influence, Colwell said.

Farm Bureau water committee member David Skinner, and also a local grower, said he thinks the plan should focus more on providing new sources of water.

Water ³isn't just bubbling out of the ground ... perhaps desalinization or more dams and reservoirs² are options.

³I'm glad something is happening, finally,² Skinner said. ³I'm glad to see Shasta Dam is being raised.²

Skinner said growers in the Chico area already use water as efficiently as possible, so cutting back on agricultural water use is not feasible.

Although the plan is on paper, it will be years before big results are seen, and that likely will be too late for more drought years.

³We haven't had a dry year since 1994,² Heringer said. ³But we certainly haven't forgotten those times. The next (drought years) will be worse. There are more people, more demands for the environment, more industry² today than in the past.

As the plan progresses growers will still face the push-and-pull of the different interests now participating in the Cal-Fed planning process.

And there's good news in what's not in the governor's plan, said Jeff Meith, an attorney who represents many water agencies in Northern California.

³There had been discussion of a so-called cross-Delta Channel, something along the lines of the peripheral canal,² Meith said. ³That is clearly not in² the plan.

The ag industry in Northern California is still hoping for more reassurance that northern counties will get enough water to continue growing.

³The most important thing we had hoped would happen throughout the whole Cal-Fed process,² Heringer said, ³is that Northern California growers would be ³kept whole,² and could hold on to full rights to water that originates here. ³We have the most to lose in this process.²

Meith shares the sentiment.

³Our view is that areas of origin have to be protected,² he said. ³We don't export until the area of origin is adequately taken care of. We agree we have to recognize the need for export (of water to the south) but we don't support doing that at our expense.²